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ABSTRACT

The rejuvenation of sagging public confidence in education through better communication was the focus of the conference. Four specific objectives were outlined: (1) to improve the ability of educators to assess public attitudes toward and interest in public education; (2) to assess the impact of different media forms on public attitudes; (3) to improve educators' ability to communicate with the public through various media forms; (4) to improve the ability of educators and members of the media to work cooperatively to meet the education information needs of the public. A synopsis of each speaker's presentation is given. Hubbel indicated that the attitudes and beliefs of the public have changed. Banach offered tactics to use to win public confidence. Bagin stated that state education agencies must make effective communication a priority. Marx made the point that effective communication with the public begins with effective communication with district employees. Presentations were also made by the education writers' workshop and the National Association of State Education Department of Information Officers panel. Suggestions for talking to reporters and a list of the most common questions asked by reporters are included. (Author/JK)

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Rejuvenating Public Confidence in Education

It was the start of something good. That was the hope of members of the CCSSO Study Commission and their public information specialists from 38 states as they met at a summer conference in Reno, Nevada to talk about ways to rejuvenate sagging public confidence in education through better communication.

Improved communication began there. Washinton Deputy Superintendent Jack Frisk, chairman of the CCSSO Study Commission, expressed that group's feelings when he said "we need to look at the whole area of public confidence" in welcoming the 57 participants to the seminar.

The Study Commission is deeply interested in exploring how the public arrives at its attitudes, said conference planning chairman Ed Steinbrecher of Colorado, who hailed the opportunity to hear from top people in the educational communications field. Steinbrecher noted that the conference was designed to deal with the priority set earlier by the Study Commission and the nation's chief state school officers to work toward restoring public confidence in education.

Steinbrecher outlined four objectives for the conference:

- To improve the ability of educators to assess public attitudes toward and interest in public education.
- To assess the impact of different media forms on public attitudes.
- To improve educators' ability to communicate with the public through various media forms.

- To improve the ability of educators and members of the media to work cooperatively to meet the education information needs of the public.

Nevada Superintendent Ted Sanders identified a combination of factors that have contributed to bringing public confidence to its present low ebb:

- Changes in size and control of the public schools. While the school population has increased by 78 percent, the number of schools and school districts has decreased at almost the same rate. Control has shifted from the citizens of the local community to the professional educators.
- Closing of the gap between the educational level of educators and much of the general populace.
- Increased demands placed on schools by the courts, the federal bureaucracy and state bureaucrats.
- Bifurcation of the profession, which has pushed administrators out from under the protective umbrella of unity.

Sanders suggested several actions to consider taking "before the kitchen gets too hot."

1. Clarify what schools are all about. Set goals and communicate them in words the public can understand.
2. Assure good teaching, learning and management of the schools. The glittering Las Vegas advertising campaign, Sanders said, will not work for education without something of substance underneath.
3. Respect parents and provide for their greater involvement in the educational enterprise, especially at the school building level.
4. Place more importance on public perceptions of the schools. Heed poll results.
5. Openly evaluate not only students, but also our own performance.

And the next challenge? "The public is demanding answers," Sanders said. "We'd better find ways of getting the message through."

Hubbell

The image is in the eye of the beholder--but the beholders have changed

"Public Attitudes -- Where Do They Begin?" was discussed by presenter Ned S. Hubbell. Hubbell told his audience that "Public confidence in education is not going down the chute, but it's sure slipping!"

Hubbell is founding president of Ned Hubbell and Associates, Public Opinion Researching. Accredited by both the National School Public Relations Association and the Public Relations Society of America, he is known by colleagues and educators throughout the country as "Mr. School P.R." plus anything else you want to add.

Hubbell said that confidence (in the schools) is often taken for granted, although it takes a long time to gain. But, he added, it is something that can be lost overnight. We see evidence of this, he said, with the defeat of local levies throughout the nation.

Speaking about Gallup polls which asked the public what grades they would give to their schools, Hubbell noted that in 1974, 49 percent gave the schools As and Bs while only 11 percent gave education poor grades -- Ds and Es. However, in 1978 the 49 percent slipped to 36 percent and the number of Ds and Es rose to 15 percent.

Hubbell empasized that the number of people with children in school is down. Another Gallup poll shows that 68 percent of the public does not currently have children in school and, therefore, no direct contact with the schools. "And we haven't seen anything yet," he added. "America is getting older In 11 years there will be more adults over 55, and that number will be higher than the enrollment in the nation's public schools."

We have difficulty, Hubbell said, reaching those people without kids in school -- the majority -- and these people most assuredly have input in polls.

Hubbell is working toward a 10-year report on how well people are informed about education. In 1979 -- after eight years of polling -- the results show that 54 percent of parents feel well informed, while 40 percent of people without children in school feel only somewhat informed about the schools.

Hubbell said he shudders when parents tell him that the most reliable source of information about education comes from children, but many people do. However, he said, the most creditable and reliable information apparently comes from the news media. Other sources of information about the schools come from:

- what teachers say.
- what other people, especially parents, say.
- school publications (which rank far down the list, Hubbell said, primarily because of severe cutbacks in school communications due to budgetary limitations).

The sources of information for people without children in school have not changed significantly in the past eight years:

- newspapers (and Hubbell was quick to note that people who rely solely on the news media for information about education are usually education's greatest critics when compared to those who use other sources in addition to the media).
- someone else's children.
- school publications.
- experience and contact with school employees.

Hubbell said that the battle of the budget continues to get news media space -- and he noted that one out of every five people give the schools a poor rating in the way districts inform people about financial affairs and the way schools are handling their money, indicating that too many people don't understand the role, the responsibilities and the limitations of local school boards.

Very little news space is allocated for curriculum -- what's being taught and how. But Hubbell noted that in most instances the reporting of student progress and test results helps to diffuse the notion many people have that "kids aren't doing as well as they used to."

When the schools are doing their job, that's normalcy, Hubbell said, and normalcy doesn't make news. What is news is that which strays from normalcy.

Hubbell also reported on a survey which identified eight different segments of school people and their attitudes toward the job being done by each segment. Respondents ranked school custodians, maintenance personnel and bus drivers on top and doing an excellent job. Teachers were rated good to excellent. Central office staff and school boards received the lowest rankings.

Fifty-four percent of the people Hubbell polled say schools have an adequate amount of money. The public must be more involved in the operation of schools, Hubbell said, and he urged state education agencies to "lean on" local districts to better inform the public about their schools. He noted the increasing number of school volunteers -- aides, tutors, and library and lunchroom assistants; 20 percent of the people Hubbell has surveyed say they would be interested in serving as a

school volunteer. This is one effort, he said, that is increasing significantly in popularity. Another is adult education programs, where the schools are serving adults who seek enrichment, "quickie" courses or skills to become something they have always wanted to be.

"Public opinion assessment is a thing whose time has long since come," Hubbell said. Many districts wait until they are confronting adversity before they consider polling the public. He advised districts not to wait until things get tough, but to become involved in "preventive" polling.

Hubbell suggested that public information efforts be beefed up -- particularly, now, through the mass media. "Public education has a good track record -- people want to believe in education."

Unfortunately, some of the more negative comments about the schools are coming from those who work there, Hubbell warned. There is a need for increased internal communications, based on a philosophy of openness, established by boards of education and implemented by management.

Banach

Tactics to win the public confidence battle

"Education might benefit from the public relations expertise in the commercial business world," William J. Banach said.

Banach, director of communications for the Macomb Intermediate School in Michigan suggests that educators consider - and adopt or adapt - the same kinds of questions that business people ask when they survey the markets and plan their strategies for public relations programs.

1. What business or market do we now own?
2. Where are we in the market place?
3. What is our best position?
4. What position do we want?
5. What do we want people to think about us?
6. Can we afford to occupy and hold the desired position?

"The answer to the last question," Banach stressed "is that we cannot afford not to occupy and hold a positive position for public education."

7. Does our advertising match our position?

"Education is no longer a public responsibility in many peoples' view." Banach said. With all the competition to "put messages in peoples' heads" educators must fight for a front position for education.

How does the public view education and educators?

Unfortunately too many people think of educators as the "folks who only work nine months a year" or the "folks who get tenure."

One of the mistakes educators make, Banach said, is to aim messages at peoples' heads all the time. Commercial advertisers, he noted, aim at peoples' hearts and stomachs.

"Educators need to learn the basic techniques to win the battle for public confidence in public education," Banach said and then discussed four strategies in "marketing warfare."

- Defense Warfare (as practiced by General Motors) is a game for leaders based on the philosophy that "the best defense is a good offense." Generally, those who play defensive warfare respond only when attacks are launched.
- Offense Warfare (as practiced by Ford) operates from the opponents strength, not your own. Those who play offensive warfare launch their own attacks on as narrow a field as possible, at the leader's weakest position.
- Flanking Warfare (Chrysler) is based on tactical surprises with attacks made on uncovered areas. Pursuit is as critical as the attack. "Attack weakness and take away part of your opponents' territory," Banach suggested.
- Gorilla Warfare (American Motors) is based on flexibility. Those who practice gorilla warfare are flexible, ready to abandon a product or market if it does not work, never act like leaders and are prepared to "bugout" at a moment's notice.

Perhaps, Banach suggested, educators should learn these war tactics and how and when to use them as they struggle for public understanding and support.

A Focus for Education

"We need a focus in education today," Banach said. "Leaders need to send out strong messages. I we do not know where to look for a focus, how do parents know? How do non-parents know, or legislators or all our other publics?"

Assessing Attitudes

In his discussions of surveying public attitudes, Banach talked about the pros and cons of mail, telephone and personal interview surveys.

Mail surveys need an 80 percent return to get sufficient information to make a valid judgement or decision, he said, pointing out that they are costly, and too often take so long to complete that by the time the returns are in public opinion has changed.

"What we usually need and want is a Polaroid picture of what people think now," he said discussing the advantages of telephone surveys.

In the final analysis, public opinion about education will be shaped by how well the various members of the education family do their jobs, Banach concluded. "Three percent of school public relations is outbound - news releases, publications, etc., seven percent of schools public relations is how you listen to your clients, and 90 percent of school public relations is who you are and what you do."

Bagin

State education agencies must make effective communication a priority

Key Communicators can be the "key" to open the door to improved communications in any organization, according to Don Bagin, who discussed communications planning with the Study Commission.

Bagin, coordinator of the master's program in educational communications at Glassboro State College in New Jersey, is a former public information specialist for the New Jersey State Department of Education and the author of six books on educational communications.

The major problem, Bagin said, is that most educators do not know what communications or public relations entail.

"The best help your public information officer (PIO) can provide to chiefs, deputies and staff can be provided when your PIO is part of your management team," Bagin said. His presentation looked at communication from two angles: survival and leadership.

If state education agencies' communications systems are to survive, Bagin stressed, it is imperative that the public information officers establish themselves with the news media as credible and informed speakers for their agency. To do this, the PIO should be present and participate in decision-making sessions, should deal honestly and forthrightly with the media (If a mistake is made, admit it!) and should establish a good rapport with members of the media. The PIO makes a good spokesman, he said, because he or she is trained to avoid jargon, to explain technical educational terms, and to speak and write in layman's language.

If state education agencies are to lead, they must create and maintain a positive atmosphere and:

- Communicate the agency's goals and expectations.
- Communicate the agency's activities.
- Develop a comprehensive plan for communications, with a communications statement for each level of department work and some method for evaluating communications.
- Provide communications training for local school district personnel.

A vital component of a comprehensive communications plan, Bagin said, is the establishment of a key communicators' network -- a cadre of people within the agency and throughout the state who talk with and are believed by their peers. Key communicators provide a two-way network -- they get the word out, they correct misinformation, they clarify and they feed information and rumors back to the agency. Although the key communicators' idea has been used more by local districts than by state agencies, it can, and does, work at the state level, too.

Bagin suggested that state agencies should compile a list of potential key communicators and invite them to small-group, one-hour meetings -- with no more than nine or ten people in any one meeting. "Key communicators don't serve as a committee," Bagin emphasized. "Tell them, at the outset, that they'll meet once and only once." The meetings themselves should be informal and should show that the agency chief is receptive to ideas and encourages questions and suggestions. The key communicators are then asked to call or write when they have information the agency should know, and are told that they will be given information about the agency when problems exist that they can help with.

Bagin also provided a pot pourri of suggestions for improving communications:

Have a news workshop for staff administrators, conducted by a reporter, so your staff will gain a better understanding of what is news and what isn't. Have a workshop for your staff to train them to write better. Have a workshop for all employees to improve their general communications/public relations attitudes and skills.

Ask several people to call your agency, then tape the call to check out your telephone communications and the treatment callers receive from staff.

Make a concerted effort to ensure that your agency serves as a leader in helping the public better understand school finance, the role of local superintendents and board members, etc.

Include your PIO in state board agenda planning, and lump your newsworthy agenda items together to make it more convenient for the news media to cover the meetings.

Remember that there's heavy competition for news coverage, but remember, too, that in addition to press conferences and news releases, the media can use fillers (a one-column headline and several sentences) about education, localized feature articles on issues of special interest, and back-to-school news items.

Call two school district superintendents every day and ask them what they like and don't like about your state department's operation. Select a couple of different employees to have lunch with once a week and discuss <u>their</u> concerns about the agency. Write a positive letter each day to a staff member, a superintendent, a parent, a student or a community leader.

"State education agencies must make effective communications a priority," Bagin said, "and that priority must be clearly understood by all staff members. It is only when a top level administrator demands effective communication that employees will invest the time and effort to make it happen."

Education Writers' Workshop

That's the way things are

Why are people uncomfortable with the media?

"People recognize that in the final analysis, it does not make any difference what you do," according to Detroit Free Press education writer William R. Grant.

"You can do everything that the experts here at this conference advise you to do, but it is the editor back home who will decide whether or not it's a story, the nature of the story, what the story is and how to use it. That's the way things are," Grant explained during the Education Writers' Workshop, "and that's the way they're likely to remain."

But, he added, you have a better chance of having your story told if you've developed an open and honest relationship with reporters.

Art Branscombe, education editor for the Denver Post, agreed, and pointed out that most persons who report on education are not trained specialists in education. Often the education beat is a training ground for new reporters. "They don't know much about education, and some don't care much, at least to start with. They need explanations, and briefing sessions on complicated issues or matters dealing with statistics, budgets, etc. -- and in plain English."

"There is a tremendous lack of perspective in local reporting," Grant said. "You have to assume that a reporter does not have a perspective, and try to give it to him along with the story."

What Is News?

Grant pointed out that in many communities the traditional approach to hard news has given way to feature stories. "The message is clear," he said. If you have a difficult and complicated issue, the best way to get it covered is to put it out in the most human terms, along with examples.

"News is the report of what happens," said Grant. Only one-third of the daily news reported appears in the New York Times. And, unlike most newspapers, the Times acts as an instant record of history. The size of the paper helps determine what is news. Most local newspapers, he pointed out, rely on the wire services to cover state government -- "and to the wire services, state government means the Governor and the Legislature."

Branscombe explained that state and national trends are newsworthy, but the basic question is "Do people need to know this?"

Other questions that reporters ask themselves in deciding what goes into a newspaper (and Branscombe noted that a reporter may have his mind changed for him by a managing editor, a general editor or an unexpected crisis that takes over page one) include:

1. Is this story unusual?
2. How many people will it interest?
3. Do people need to know? Do they need to know today?
4. Have I covered this situation recently? Should I?
5. What other things should go into the paper first?
6. Does it rate page 1 or page 3?
7. If it's a controversial matter, do I owe the other side a story?
8. Do I need more time to round up the facts and organize the story?

Speaking briefly about radio and TV news, the workshop presenters pointed out that although TV is the least accurate form of information, it is the most believed. "What is seen on television is not always what was there," Grant noted, "but people believe what they see." TV cannot report complex issues as well as newspapers, and TV news must be visual.

Reporters' Motivation

Reporters and editors are not objective. They make many subjective decisions: what to cover; how much of what happens or is said to include in the report; what information or statements to feature or highlight (order of importance); what interpretation, if any, to give to the facts; what to feature in the headline; and where to place the article in the newspaper.

"There has yet to be created an unbiased reporter," said Grant.

"Grant also contested several myths about news reporters, saying that:

- The motivation of a reporter is not to sell newspapers or increase ratings.
- "Seeing it first" is not a primary concern. Reporters pride themselves on being accurate and complete. Most errors are made because of incomplete information.
- Reporters are extremely sensitive to conflict of interest. Their personal code includes "that you don't go anywhere without paying."

Headlines Shape Attitudes

Participants' questions introduced the subject of headlines. Participants were concerned over their impact and the low priority newspapers give to writing accurate headlines.

The excuse that reporters do not write the headlines to their stories was not good enough for the Study Commission Conference participants. However, the presenters did not see a change in sight.

"Headlines influence people more than editorials. Newspapers shape public attitudes through headlines. People read headlines and not stories. Headlines also give the readers a mindset on the article," Branscombe agreed.

Branscombe and Grant also outlined the laws that protect news reporters.

Courts Protect Reporters

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution provides that "Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech or of the press..."

This amendment prohibits the federal government from interfering with the rights of the public and of the news media to disseminate information.

"Everything is and should be public except for information covered by statutes," said Grant. He advised participants to become experts on their own state's open meetings laws, and to make sure their staff understand that almost all their agency information <u>is</u> public information.

- The Freedom of Information Act requires federal agencies to disclose all reports requested by a member of the public (media included), except nine categories specifically exempted. This act applies to such agencies as the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, but it does not apply to state and local school districts and agencies.

• The Federal Privacy Act limits the right of federal agencies to disclose records pertaining to an individual's education, financial transactions, medical or employment history, or criminal conduct. This Act also permits individuals to inspect the information on them kept by a federal agency. It also directs all federal agencies to minimize the collection of personal information.

• The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act limits media access to the education record of students in public or private schools which receive federal assistance. The Act provides that no federal funding will be given to any educational institution or agency which has a policy of releasing education records without the written consent of the student's parents to personnel other than school officials, testing and accrediting organizations, certain federal and state education agencies and other designated officials.

Grant also discussed libel of public officials. Libel is defined as a false publicized statement which tends to injure a person's reputation or to expose him to public contempt.

"The news media can say just about anything about 'public people.' 'Public people' is defined as people in a public circumstance," said Grant. Teachers, administrators and school board members are deemed "public people."

In addition, the law says you must prove that the information was wrong and published maliciously. Neither a failure to investigate, nor an expression of opinion, constitutes "actual malice."

The Education Writers' Association

The Education Writers' Association (EWA) is an international professional organization of persons who report about education for the news media, persons who report about education in trade and professional journals, and persons employed by educational organizations and institutions who are responsible for communications.

EWA was founded in 1947 by a group of reporters covering the convention of the National Education Association in Cincinnati. The organization's purpose then and now is to work for the improvement of education reporting to the public. Today, the membership of EWA totals nearly 500.

How to talk to a reporter

1. Use common sense. If you can answer a reporter's question in the area of your responsibility, do so, honestly. Do not guess. Do not speculate. Be specific.

2. Respond promptly.

3. All completed reports and surveys are public property. You may not withhold such data when it is requested.

4. You do not have to release your own rough drafts, working papers, preliminary figures, or notes.

5. Preliminary publicity about a program enhances the likelihood that it will get public attention when it is complete.

6. It is usually not necessary to be an auditor - accurate with figures. Good round numbers will do.

7. Avoid educational jargon. Always.

8. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know. I'll call you back in ten minutes." And don't fail to call back.

9. Don't overdo the practice of speaking off the record.

10. When you receive a telephone call from a reporter that you cannot handle, do not transfer the call to long shot possibilities.

11. Never ask a reporter to show you his/her story before it is published.

12. When you have responded to an inquiry that is substantive, please notify your immediate supervisor and the information office promptly.

13. If you believe you have a worthwhile and timely story to tell, get in touch with the information office to help you get it placed.

14. What can you do if you are misquoted or if there is some other mistake in a published story? Generally, if nobody is hurt by the mistake, do nothing. If the mistake is a serious one, you have three options: (1) Call the reporter and say that he or she did wrong; (2) send a calm letter to the editor; (3) call the reporter's boss.

Information most often sought

Reporters sometimes express surprise and frustration when they contact state education department officials for basic information and find that the information has not been compiled or is not available. Below are typical questions that state education officials may be asked by reporters.

Common Questions

What is the current public school enrollment for the state and by county or region?

What was the enrollment for the past five years?

What is the projected enrollment for the next five years?

What percentage of the enrollment is minority (with a breakdown by minority)?

How many physically and mentally handicapped students are enrolled?

How many handicapped students are mainstreamed and how many are in special classes?

How many students participate in programs subsidized by Title I, ESEA, for the state and by county/region?

How many students are in other programs financed wholly or in part by federal funds?

How many teachers are employed full time in the state and by county or region?

What percentage of the teachers are minority (with a breakdown by minority)?

How many non-teaching personnel are employed full time in the state and by county/region? (These data also should show a minority breakdown.)
How many administrators are employed full time in the state and by county/region? (These data also should show a minority breakdown.)

How many school buildings are there in the state and by county/region?
How many elementary schools?
How many middle or junior high schools?
How many high schools?
How many special schools, e.g. vocational and technical?

For the state, what are the average or typical district costs:
- Cost to operate an elementary, middle, and high school?
- Percentage of the district budget for instructional purposes?
- Percentage of the budget for teachers' salaries?
- Percentage of the budget for administrators' salaries?
- Percentage of total revenue from local taxes?
- Percentage of total revenue from state government?
- Percentage of toal revenue from the federal government?
- Cost per pupil, and how is it computed?
- Teacher's salary?

How are textbooks selected?
How are districts in the state complying with the provisions of major federal and state laws, e.g., Education for All Handicapped Children, Family Rights and Privacy Act, etc.?

How are students doing on achievement, aptitude and basic skills (competency) tests for the state and by county/region? (Note: There should be data for the past five years for comparison purposes.)

(Compiled for the CCSSO Study Commission by the Education Writers' Association.)

Neill & Barkelew

The California model

California is one state that has taken the "key communicators' concept," put it to work and made it succeed. George Neill, Assistant Commissioner for Public Information, California Department of Education, and Ann Barkelew, Public Information Officer for the Office of the Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools, are enthusiastic about past accomplishments and optimistic about future ones.

Neill, who formerly served as Director of Communications for the Education Commission of the States (ECS), is also a former executive editor of Education U.S.A. and Education U.S.A. Special Reports. Barkelew, president of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), is accredited by both the Public Relations Society of America and by NSPRA.

The key communications effort is coordinated by a special advisory committee formed by the state agency to help improve communications between and among state, county and local education agencies. The committee, chaired by Barkelew, is comprised of seven information specialists from county or local school offices, one member representing state associations, and three members from the state agency, including Neill. "The committee meets at least four times a year, usually for a full day, with expenses for members who are not state employees being paid by the state," Neill said. Agendas, developed in advance by Barkelew and Neill, include whatever issues the members believe need to be discussed. Non-members are often invited to attend and participate.

The advisory committee "advises" generally on the state agency's communications efforts. And occasionally, Barkelew said, there are problems. "The major one is the bureaucracy of the State Department of Education. We need to build a sensitivity in top management that some information input is necessary."

The advisory committee also helps with two major state agency communications projects -- an ongoing effort to inform and involve the state's public information officers, and annual seminars for the press.

Neill said that State Department of Education officials began meeting with county communications specialists in 1972-73. By 1976, this collaboration had developed into a formal system of briefings by department officials at all scheduled bi-monthly meetings of the county PIOs. In addition, the department held several special all-day briefing sessions for school PIOs who represent both counties and districts. Since Proposition 13, the briefings have been limited to the regular meetings of the county PIOs and the two California NSPRA chapters, but, Barkelew said, "We do spread the word." At least one hour is set aside at each meeting for the department briefing; topics are selected jointly by department officials and the PIOs, and the department designates a person to do the briefing and prepare background materials for distribution.

Neill said that the PIO network consists of 500 full- or part-time information officers who were identified by counties and districts in a department survey. These PIOs represent one-half of the state's 1,045 school districts and about 90% of the state's school enrollment. Districts which do not have information officers are informed via the county PIOs, Barkelew added.

All of the department's most important news releases, reports, studies and management memos are sent to the PIO network to augment the impact of copies that are sent to local superintendents. The local PIOs, in turn, re-release the news releases, with a local angle, to all media in the area, and reprint information from the state agency in their own newsletters and publications.

"This system benefits all of us," Barkelew noted, "because we are notified ahead of time. There is nothing more devastating than a surprise news release from the state agency that sics the press on a local district."

The local PIOs also help the state department by setting up meetings, press conferences and media contacts when the chief state school officer visits local districts, and they provide "rumor alerts" to the state agency.

Once a year the California Department of Education and the California Newspaper Publisher's Association (CNPA) co-sponsor a one-day seminar for editors, publishers and reporters on significant issues confronting the state's schools. "CNPA adopted the idea," Neill said, "as part of its inservice program." Program costs are paid for from a $25 registration fee.

Ideas for the CNPA program come from Neill and the department's Communications Advisory Committee and are presented to a CNPA panel which accepts, rejects and adds their own suggestions. Typical discussion topics include such things as the state superintendent's predictions of the top education stories of the year, issues the press is missing, how to report a school budget, Proposition 13's impact on the schools and education recommendations from the Governor's Commission on Government Reform.

In addition to presentations, the department distributes a wide range of background printed materials to provide additional information on the subjects discussed.

Aside from "educating" the press, Neill said, there are added dividends: more press interest in major educational issues, more accurate reporting, and the development of personal contacts between the department and many newspaper representatives. "This year, as a result of the oral presentations, the printed materials and the interviews conducted outside the session by alert reporters, major articles were published in more than 50 of the state's newspapers."

Marx

Effective communication happens from the inside out

Like charity, good public relations begin at home.

To build confidence in education, start with your own staff. That was the message from Gary Marx, Associate Director for Communications, American Association of School Administrators.

Stressing the importance of internal communications, Marx says research confirms the need for well-informed staff members,for these reasons:

1. People need to know the goals of an organization before they can get involved in accomplishing them.

2. The level of effectiveness is higher when the right hand knows what the left hand is doing.

3. Uninformed people cause morale problems.

"Where there is coordination, 'synergy' exists. When that happens, people can get past divisions and dynasties to work for the overall goals of the organization," Marx said.

Then Marx, a dynamic communicator, listed some "cardinal rules of P.R.," which included the following ideas:

- Communication happens best from the inside out.
- A major source of information about an organization is its employees. Employee attitudes are contagious in the community.

Marx said that several factors, or "syndromes," tend to block communication. One is the "certified/classified" syndrome -- calling some professionals, others non-professionals. Another is the "level" syndrome -- too often, he noted, we allow position and the role we play to stand in the way of effective communicating. The "union management" syndrome and the "age group" syndrome block communication, too. And some old-timers in an organization have the "vested interest" syndrome; they block communication that threatens too much change.

A dangerous syndrome, Marx said, is the "clique" syndrome. This happens when groups join forces against other groups, and it's caused by a lack of trust and, often, "shared misery."

"If you have lots of cliques in your organization, you probably have lots of fear in the organization," Marx said. "We are purveyors of fear, we're also affected by fear."

Working in small groups, participants looked at forces which cause fear, the behavior of fearful employees, ways fear levels are increased, and the top priority concerns of the Study Commission members about communication breakdowns.

Forces which increase the fear level, participants agreed, are such things as staff and budget cuts, reorganization, hostile leadership (either executive or legislative), lack of direction and lack of incentive. In organizations where the fear level is high, the participants also agreed, employees tend to behave in the following ways: they hide, complain, form cliques, they resort to blaming, backbiting, hostility and one-upmanship and they conceal information as well as innovative ideas. (They also, one group suggested, "turn to alcohol and drug abuse, develop ulcers, have heart attacks, lose friends, turn gray and lose their hair, talk to themselves, answer themselves, and, sometimes, become deputies.)

"If each of us cared about the other, our performance -- and our attitudes -- would improve," Marx suggested.

Marx listed 12 things a state education agency can do to improve internal communication:

1. Listen to employees. Give them comfortable opportunities to give you feedback. And survey your staff, every year, with specific questions.

2. Establish a staff advisory committee. Rotate membership. (Let them know they aren't running the store, just advising.)

3. Give credit where credit is due.

4. Establish "key communicators" throughout your organization, and let the staff help identify them. These people can give you feedback, and help you get out the word.

5. Publish an internal staff newsletter on a regular basis.

6. Have frequent staff meetings to inform employees about current programs and activities. Make sure the staff meetings are effective.

7. Provide opportunites for informal get-togethers where people can get to know each other as people.

8. Remember the importance of non-verbal communications. For example, when we get a good idea, we tend to look up to the ceiling. And crossed arms and legs indicate closed minds.

9. Get out of the office. Meet people on their own turf. (But keep your staff informed about your own activities and schedule.)

10. Don't envy employee success. Their success is yours. Your job is to release their potential. To do it, try complimenting, being helpful, caring, avoiding defensiveness.

11. Provide opportunities for personal and professional staff growth.

12. Communicate through evaluations. Provide job descriptions for all staff and establish mutual understanding of objectives. Ask "How can I help, what do we need to do?"

Marx concluded that the overall goal is team management. "The essence of team management is effective internal communication. And the No. 1 source of ideas, information and attitudes about an agency is the staff itself.

"Remember that good communication is a survival skill. And unless we do it at home, first, it's hard to do it anywhere else."

NASEDIO Panel

Ideas to adapt

"Public information officers (PIOs) and public relations people specialize in thievery," said Colorado PIO Doug Bassett, "one is always willing to steal -- and perhaps improve -- a good idea from a colleague."

So a panel discussion featured "ideas to steal" from three NASEDIO members highlighting successful communication practices.

Bassett described a Colorado project, "education issues conferences," for education reporters and communications officials from school districts. The first conference, attended by 65 people, led to news coverage throughout the school year. This and other public relations efforts have enabled Colorado education leaders to meet with people personally and establish priorities in the effort to improve public confidence in education. Bassett said that a strong effort is needed to improve public confidence, judging by the Gallup Poll's documentation of a drop in confidence in the nation's schools.

Since 1954 Colorado has held an event called Colorado Public School Week. This year, the entire year will focus on events based around the theme "Education is Everyone's Business." Sub-themes are designated for each month during the school year. Over 200 individuals, organizations, and companies have joined to support the effort to make 1979-80 "Colorado Public School Year." The effort is expected to generate valuable personal contacts with the public as well as extensive media coverage.

Colorado's newsletter -- its vehicle for communicating frequently with a mass audience -- recently underwent a format change, "it reveals the value of brevity," Bassett said. The agency cut back from a tabloid newspaper to a shorter, newsletter, format -- and the result is that a record number of calls and letters now flow to the agency in response to the articles.

Wyoming's Nan Patton, the outgoing president of NASEDIO, stressed personal approaches to public relations and communications. She urged state agencies to investigate the possibilities offered by a new training kit on public relations inservice sessions. The kit has been produced by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA).

Patton cited an Arizona State Department of Education program which brought children ages 4 to 15 into the agency one day to see parents (or other relatives) at work. They visited the Capitol and Legislature, received coloring books and games and were awarded certificates. In addition to boosting the morale of all involved, widespread news media coverage was achieved.

She also cited another big media success: the comprehensive packet on education issues and trends produced by the California Department of Education as a "back to school" project.

"I also encourage you to survey your state to see how well you are communicating with your local schools and organizations," said Patton. One survey showed that such communication may generally be "mediocre." Surveys will help your state determine the extent of its communications achievements, and failures!

Mary Wiermanski, director of program communications for CCSSO, also boosted the value of surveys. They can show an agency how to improve the awareness of every staff member in regard to his/her communications responsibilities, she said. They can also help you avoid some tragic mistakes.

Wiermanksi also drew an important analogy between local and state education agency communications.

Before joining the Council, she worked as a consultant for a regional education agency providing communication services to local school districts that were too expensive or sophisticated for individual districts to provide. She described a model for services that state departments could adapt to provide services to their constituencies to improve the image of education.

"In a time of rising costs, declining resources and reluctant taxpayers, school districts have enough trouble maintaining existing educational programs without considering adding public relations staff," she said.

The regional service approach meets many of the needs of districts with limited resources.

The agency discovered a serious need for help in developing programs for communicating with and understanding their publics. Staff assisted school districts in surveys, research and planning, financial elections, inservice programs and publication development.

Sharing communication resources provided school districts with communication programs that avoided the band-aid approach to public relations. Planning is the key element in good P.R. programs that regional and state agencies can provide.

Wherry

The greatest opportunity we've ever had

Public confidence in education -- bolstering the willingness of people to participate in and pay for their local school system -- must be a primary goal of each state department of education. In 1979, with public support for many institutions in an obvious downhill slide, achieving this goal will not be a simple or short-term task. It will, in fact, take a long-term effort and one directed by an experienced specialist in listening, speaking, writing, analyzing and interpreting -- an expert in public relations.

"We must, in short, do the best job we can for kids, and we must let the public know about it," Dr. John Wherry, Executive Director of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), said in the final session. "That's the bottom line."

Wherry, former Communications Director for the Kansas City Public Schools, keyed his remarks to the philosophy developed by Edward Bernays, founder of the relatively new profession of public relations.

"Bernays' concept of public relations was really quite simple," Wherry explained. "He defined it as the practice of social responsibility -- or doing the right thing."

This philosophy is well understood by the members of the National Association of State Education Department Information Officers (NASEDIO) and of NSPRA, who serve their states and districts as public relations officers no matter what their official titles may be, Wherry said.

"They are not just good news boys and girls. Their concept of their job goes much deeper than that."

We must develop in our own minds and agencies a more sophisticated understanding of what we mean by public relations, Wherry urged. Then, we must base our work on a written policy as the basis for action.

Wherry emphasized that every state department of education should have a professional public relations person managing the public information/public relations program. "Forty percent of the typical state superintendent's or commissioner's time is spent on public relations. Are we getting our money's worth out of this effort without a professionally-trained person to manage it?" he asked. And, he added, lack of budget is no excuse. Without this kind of commitment, we will fail in the court of public opinion.

"Three people in your agency must know everything about the department and must see the problems from the same perspective: the chief, the deputy and the public information officer." The P.R. officer is really the radar officer. He or she must look ahead to see what the problems are -- and then become involved in the managment of the department in order to help solve them.

What should you expect from your public information officer? Wherry says that he or she should:

- Establish and maintain two-way communications systems, both internal and external.
- Develop and maintain factual information about the department -- a "facts on file" ready reference.
- Provide intelligence to key administrators about public attitudes, concerns and issues.
- Ask tough questions about what the agency is doing -- and why.
- Recommend department policies, procedures and programs to serve the public interest.

- Develop a communications component for every major program, policy and procedure that the state board or the agency adopts.
- Evaluate public relations efforts on a regular basis.

The time is now, Wherry said, to begin the job of building public confidence in education. Start with the involvement of every staff member; develop an inservice program on public relations.

We should become more sophisticated in our selection of appropriate communications media, Wherry advised. We can't expect newspapers to do it all for us -- that's not their job. Mass media do not develop or change attitudes, they simply provide information. Attitudes are developed most effectively through face-to-face communication, and newspapers, radio and television simply reinforce pre-existing attitudes.

Wherry stated that, in his opinion, we have richly earned the low rate of confidence people are currently expressing in public education. But, he added, we can rebuild this confidence if we will:

- Put someone in charge of rebuilding it.
- Involve every employee in the process.
- Work to involve every school district in the state.
- Plan to increase citizen involvement throughout the state.
- Mold and influence public expectations about education.
- Work to fulfill those public expectations.

He notes that expert help is available from the staff public information/public relations officer, from the National Association of State Education Department Information Officers, from National School Public Relations Association state chapters, and from the NSPRA office in Arlington, Virginia.

"We've got the public's attention," Wherry concluded. "Now it's up to us to make the most of the greatest opportunity we've ever had."

"We need to go back now and look at the whole area of communications and public relations. Then we need to look at it again a year from now and ask ourselves, 'Has it made a difference? Where do we go from here?"'

--Ed Steinbrecher

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is comprised of the superintendents and commissioners of education in the 50 states and seven extra-state jurisdictions (American Samoa, Canal Zone, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, Pacific Islands and Virgin Islands).

Recognizing the responsibility of states for educational leadership, CCSSO exists to aid its members, and their agencies, in meeting that challenge.

CCSSO established a Study Commission to review the implications of issues in public education and to prepare policy and priority statements for the Council's review. Upon adoption, these policies and priorities become working goals of the Council in meeting its responsibilities for educational leadership in the United States.

Each Study Commission representative is a key executive, usually the deputy superintendent or commissioner. The Study Commission meets twice a year to discuss educational issues of concern.

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The National Association of State Education Department Information Officers (NASEDIO) is the professional association for information and communication directors and staff members of state, territory and province education agencies working in the public information, public relations or publications field.

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